Tuesday, February 4th, 2014

2014.02.04 Prairie Chicken Committee Meeting

Potential revisions to the Incidental Take Protocol for GPCH

- What are the Incidental Take Protocols all about, and how do they fit in with the conservation of threatened and endangered species in Wisconsin? They were created in the late 1990s with definitions under state statute and endangered species law as well as a corresponding administrative rule. Most permits are individual permits which are issued on a project-by-project basis. The grassland protocol is considered a "broad incidental take permit" and Dave Sample is the main species expert. The goal for any project is always to minimize and mitigate take.

- Davin: there were proposals to expand the percentage of acreage that can be managed, as well as to adjust the dates related to the nesting period. We've also attempted to clarify some definitions. One of the main things we've been trying to work through is the issue of private lands that are managed by NRCS; we need to figure out the boundaries that cover the 30% management guideline. The way that the protocol has been written just defines habitat as any type of habitat - we could specify that further. This would help with the issue of take (the real concern is where the chicks are, so we need to separate out breeding habitat). We'll also separate out leks, and not worry as much about brood-rearing habitat. Scott is wondering how this would play out when we add up the managed acres each year. Lump NRCS and state-managed lands into one project (one each for Buena Vista and Paul J. Olson). Conventionally-grazed acres will be excluded from nesting & breeding habitat.

- Selective brush cutting = no restrictions

- We're managing chickens on an old tamarack swamp; BV and PJO really “want” to be woody/brushy. We have to take into account the fact that the least disturbance as possible is best for the birds, but we NEED disturbance to manage the habitat for the birds. We're losing acres. 20% may sound like a lot, but it's not enough to keep ahead of the brush. The managers want an increase in flexibility more than anything; the work they do can vary a great deal from year to year. Most of what they do involves mowing and herbicide use; there's very little burning.

- With NRCS review requests, the biggest roadblock is using the old idea of the property boundary as the site and not being able to look at the surrounding habitat. If no monitoring of prairie chickens is occurring on a specific (private) property, incidental take isn't allowed. BUT, Lesa says, monitoring is defined in the ITP. All

private lands within the project boundaries are considered to be monitored. Dave Sample would like us to remove the restriction further than 1 mile away from an established lek. Lesa wouldn't be comfortable with using just that spring's lek locations - we'd need to use the locations from the past 2-3 years and have a solid definition of what a lek is. Scott Hull agrees with Dave. So, instead of the project boundary being the area we're concerned about, it would be the known leks with a 1-mile buffer drawn around them. That's where we tabulate grassland acres and start to worry about going over 20-30%. This would give the managers a lot more flexibility away from the leks. Scott Walter looked at a map of the 2009 leks, and thinks that buffer would swallow everything contained in the project boundary (with less representation in the southern portion going from the 2013 lek locations). Dave also makes the error of thinking all GRP properties look like Mel Potter's land. There are some definite differences between BV and PJO (PJO has more grazing and resting paddocks). Does Erin think there's value in Dave's approach? It may help, but what happens when we start losing leks? It's easier to manage the land, but it doesn't help the chickens.

- Concern of incidental take seems to revolve around nesting hens. BUT most of these hens are going to re-nest if disturbed. Are we over-emphasizing the importance of management near the nests? The issue is that the hens will re-nest within the same general area. We don't want to prevent the hens from having easy access to unmanaged land. How far is a hen willing to go to re-nest? This runs us up against state law, too, because we wouldn't be actively minimizing take. Is there a simple solution that would allow for the maintenance of idle grass? Lesa recommends an exercise with some sort of GIS buffer.

- Are we giving NHC any valuable information? It seems like we're all on the same page, but we need to figure out how to handle the NRCS/private/state land combo. We need to define nesting habitat. There's no resolution here today, but at least we know what the issues are. If we go down the path to create maximum flexibility for landowners, how can we avoid causing additional issues? At the end of the day, Lesa and Erin would end up with less flexibility.

UWSP/WDNR brood survival study update

- Post-translocation: Where do we go from here?
  - Wisconsin's northern and southern populations are genetically isolated --> extinction vortex (small, fragmented populations --> inbreeding; loss of genetic diversity --> reduced adaptability, survival, and reproduction --> reduced N)

- Wisconsin GPCH Conservation Genetics Advisory Committee met January 4-5, 2005 in Madison and again in January 2013
- GPCH translocation, 2006-2001:
  - the translocation was successful: MN genes in WI population
  - relatively small net gain in genetic diversity due to ongoing genetic drift
  - no evidence of reduced fitness due to inbreeding
  - random genetic drift will continue
  - population still declining, range contracting
  - Recommendations: re-assess chick/juvenile survival, complete a Population Viability Analysis
    - Chick Survival Part 2: the panel specifically recommends focusing on factors that influence nesting success and chick survival which are often implicated as limiting population growth in prairie chickens.
    - Why study chick survival? What is the rationale behind the Genetics Panel recommendations? Brood survival was very low in 2 of 3 seasons during translocation, and it could be the major factor limiting population growth. We only looked at survival between 5-12 weeks, and we were unable to determine cause-specific mortality due to a conservative approach. Therefore, we're uncertain about habitat conditions where mortality events occurred. The Genetics Panel is very interested in any differences that may exist between Paul Olson and Buena Vista.
    - GPCH juvenile survival assessment (2014-2015): led by Dr. Jason Riddle and Matt Broadway @ UWSP. Funded by WDNR, UWSP, NRF. Study objective = to determine juvenile survival rates and cause-specific mortality at a stable/increasing population (Paul Olson) and a stable/declining population (Buena Vista).
    - Why will we be successful? How do we manage risk? The project was approved through the UWSP Animal Care & Use Committee (which includes academics and veterinarians with expertise in animal capture and handling). The research permit was approved through WDNR. UWSP and WDNR have been meeting for the past 4 months to develop field protocol and assess risk.

Study protocols will be implemented to lower risk to birds but provide high-quality data. Examples include: trapping on more leks, but less intensively at each site (so that leks will be rested); using different necklace-style radio transmitter for chicks (instead of backpack-style = lighter weight, friendlier attachment method, proven in other states); monitoring broods more frequently but with more caution. Radio transmitters will be attached to no more than 3 chicks per brood.

- Expected outcome: brood survival estimates (0-30 day chicks, 30-90 day chicks, 90 days to breeding population), chick mortality (cause of death, habitat conditions where they survived/died), information to focus management, ultimate goal = grow population.

- Demographic modeling - applications to GPCH management (Mike Hardy)
  - Called for by the original GPCH management plan and the Genetics Panel
  - Decision analysis: which conservation strategy is most beneficial?
- Discussion/questions
  - What's the time frame? The first field season is in 2014, starting in March. It's a 2-year project with 2 field seasons. The planning process will take place once the field project and modeling work are completed. The development of the plan is heavily reliant on this study, which we discussed at our last meeting in September. However, we could do PVA right now using data from the past 30 years (it would just be a better analysis with the survival rates for the different juvenile age periods). One of Mike's concerns is that we only have juvenile survival rates from Buena Vista, and even this data has the greatest uncertainty. It's the least rigorous of all the components measured during translocation.
  - One of the downsides to shorter study periods is that they don't take all of the potential climatic variations into account. If we have two good brood-rearing periods, how do we broaden the confidence intervals in to account for potential bad weather? Important to note that this model won't just be built on the 2 years of the field study. We'll be developing a range based on other research done in Wisconsin. It's part of the sensitivity analysis of the model.
  - Are we going to attempt to trap hens before the start of the breeding season? Matt was on BV trying to do some work this winter, but he struck out. He may try again while there's still snow on the ground. It'll be easier in the space of time between

the two years of study, when we have some radioed hens to follow and potentially find others.

- What's the life of the transmitters put on the hens? 2 years. We're expecting to do some supplementary trapping in 2015 to make up for the hens that will inevitably die. Any males we trap will be banded, but not radioed. These bands may be identifiable by observers on the lek (like members of the public).
- Tylochronology (examining the growth of the feather). We'll pluck a feather each time the bird is trapped, and the measured growth will let us build an index to condition.

Process & timeline for revision of 2004 GPCH Plan

- Will need WPT approval
- Public input will be important (Nemec/Sharp theses provide significant social information)
- Process & structure for revision
  - How do we want to approach developing the document? Recommendations:
    - Separate groups, led by Scott/Krista, will convene to evaluate key issues (current information, information needs, identification of optimal strategies). E.g., public lands management, genetic health, private lands management, research needs, population dynamics, etc.
    - Plan revision "strike teams" (8-12 people most meaningful):
      - Public lands management
        - local staff (Brian Peters, Jon Robaidek, Erin Grossman, Lesa Kardash)
        - retired local staff (Greg Dahl, Jim, Tom Meier)
        - GPCH habitat experts (Dave Sample, Chris Ribic, Yoyi Steele)
        - Grazing expert (Teal Fyksen)
        - DCCL (Scott will get in touch & ask for nominee)
        - WSO (Bill Mueller is first point of contact)

- Dog trial folks (Erin will contact)
- STCP (Bill Schultheis)

- Private lands management
  - USDA from Portage & Wood Counties (FSA - Jake Bourget & NRCS - Melissa Knipfel)
  - County staff (Portage Co. = Dan O'Connell, Wood County = talk to Jerry Storke)
  - Farm Bill Biologists (Julie Peterson, potentially Josh Nemec)
  - USFWS (Mark Pfost)
  - Extension (Wood Co. = Matt Lippert; Portage Co. = Ken Kittleson) - we might just put the Extension staff into the outreach group
  - Mike Schwake (PJO landowner but not a farmer - Dan O'Connell will contact), BV landowner to be recommended by Erin G. (John Eron is a grain farmer from Portage Co. and is involved with the Farm Bureau - Dan O'Connell will contact)
  - Bring the grazing expert(s) in again (instead of Grassworks)
  - Northcentral Conservancy (land trust - talk with Aaron Thompson)
  - Wetland Conservation League? (Chuck Schellin)
  - Do we want to include local DNR staff? Sure, Lesa & Erin are in.

- Outreach/education/partnership development
  - CWGCA Coordinator
  - Bob Holsman & Jordan Petchenik (if we pursue public input or attempt to sell our product to local landowners/farmers)
  - County Extension folks (Wood and Portage Co. education/outreach reps)
  - Somebody skilled with web/social media (OC rep - Ed Culhane?) - Scott will talk with Bill Cosh
  - Kris Johansen (talk to him first)

    - Research/modeling/genetic health/spatial analysis
        - Scott Hull
        - Jason Riddle/grad student (Matt)
        - Ben Zuckerburg/grad student (Mike Hardy)
        - Peter Dunn (if interested)
        - Davin Lopez
        - Erin Grossman & Lesa Kardash
        - Lowell Suring

- TIMELINE
    - March 2014: WPT approval of revision plan of attack (Scott will draft this issue brief and send it to the committee before submitting it to the WPT)
    - May 2014: Approach local organizations/landowners and solicit feedback on current plan goals and ideas for integrating chicken habitat into revision. What do they think we could focus on? Web presentation/survey? Tony Sharp already did some of this work. Davin doesn't think we should ask questions without having a plan for using the information (which is where we bring in Jordan Petchenik). Forget this paragraph!
    - June 2014 - May 2015: strike teams develop analyses of past work and detailed options for future work (to be incorporated into demographic model) and work to draft "background" sections of the Plan. After this is done, take them out for public input (new addition to this bullet).
    - June 2015: GPCH Committee develops utility functions (R) for each management alternative developed by the strike teams.
    - July - August 2015: public input phase - management options are laid out for public review, on web and at local meetings. Lowell wonders if this should come after the development of the demographic model so that information can also be available to the public. Scott's response: maybe before we meet as a committee to discuss utility functions, we want to get some more public input (reflected in edits above).

- August - October 2015: demographic model used to develop probability of persistence for each potential management option, scaled by utility functions
- October 2015 - January 2016: Upland Program staff organize and write draft plan for review
- January 2016: GPCH Committee review of draft plan
- March 2016: WPT review of draft plan
- April 2016: Public notice; further public input if needed
- June 2016: Submit yellow sheet for NRB presentation of final plan
- July 2016: Submit green sheet for NRB presentation of final plan
- August 2016: Present final plan to NRB for approval

Farm Bill update

- The next GPCH management plan will place an emphasis on habitat management on private lands (for which the FB is a valuable vehicle). The FB itself will approve certain conservation programs, like baseline funding for CRP/GRP/etc., but implementation by USDA agencies such as NRCS and FSA won't be known until they come out with their implementation strategies. We'll have CRP for the next 5 years but don't know the specific components that will be emphasized.
- What Scott knows about the new FB: CRP is going to receive baseline funding but the cap on the total amount of acreage that's allowed to be enrolled nationally will go from 32 million acres down to 24 million acres. This cap reduction doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but one justification is that farmers were abandoning CRP during discussions due to high crop prices. There's a five-year schedule for the cap reduction. This cap reduction is bad timing because the price of corn has gone from $8.03 a year ago to a record corn surplus and a $5 ceiling for corn for the foreseeable future, and CRP will become increasingly attractive to farmers who will then have to compete to enroll. FSA will make CRP a working lands program (benefit taxpayers by protecting soil/water) that focuses on continuous practices. They might do away with the annual CRP sign-ups. CRP-SAFE will get more attention. WI hasn't done well up to this point enrolling SAFE acres (although we do follow USDA's directions better than many other states) - we haven't used all of our allocated acres, and other states want those acres for themselves. Internally within WI, when one of the CRP

project areas reaches its allocation and sees unused acres elsewhere in the state, they ask for them! But it's hard to attract new enrollees when your acres are reduced. It's a difficult balance. GRP has been rolled along with WRP and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program into the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Historically, the feds provided funding for 75% of the cost of the easement - that will go down to 50% and local entities will have to increase their investment (except for grasslands designated as being of special significance, definition unknown). If we can get CWGCA (and our other 3 grassland areas) designated thusly, it would be very helpful. There is no more WHIP (which isn't necessarily a bad thing; the state technical committee ensured that all previous WHIP practices were converted over to EQIP). In the new FB at least 5% of a state's EQIP funding must be used to benefit wildlife (i.e. what we used to spend on WHIP). Direct payments are "out the window". Conservation compliance has been re-linked with crop insurance subsidy payments (a huge request from the conservation community). This mandates than anybody receiving these payments has to adhere to a conservation plan for the entire property as laid out by an NRCS agent. Sod Saver is back, but not in Wisconsin (ND, MT, MN, NE, SD) - this prohibits tilling of native prairie/sod by farmers receiving federal funding. With the previous FB, NRCS staff were paid using taxpayer dollars to work with landowners to write and implement conservation plans. Now, landowners may have to pay for this technical assistance (*check with Scott to see if this really is the case before distributing notes*). NHC is putting together a public NHI portal that anybody can use to see what T&E elements occur within a mile of any proposed conservation. Anything they find is good for the life of the CRP contract, including mid-contract management.

Status of Coordinator position

- Wasn't feasible to work through another local organization (too time intensive for such a small financial contribution from the DNR), so the decision was to just hire the Coordinator as a DNR LTE. All Scott can say is that they're engaged in the hiring process right now.
- Lowell - is it costing more than the initial $10,000 to hire the Coordinator in this manner? Right now there's only enough funding to keep this person going for 6 months, but part of their job description is to pursue alternate sources of funding with which to support themselves.

Partner updates/announcements

- Lowell: sends in reports after every meeting, but doesn't get any responses, so he assumes they're happy!

Public input

- Peter: good job! Might email Scott.